Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle

HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTARS™

HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTARS 3

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EPIC COMICS®

IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT——

DAN SPIEGLE

——GET OUT OF HOLLYWOOD!

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Hello. Odds are, I'm *Mark Evanier* again, here with *Dan Spiegle* and yet another issue of **Hollywood Superstars.** I wish I could tell you that this one was pure fiction but, unfortunately, nothing in Hollywood is pure fiction. Except, of course, for Profit Participation and three-picture studio deals. All else is real...or, at least, as real as things get in a town where "Autumn" involves taking down the green plastic plants and putting out the brown plastic plants. This issue, we begin the story of a kid who wanted to be a movie star in the worst way – which is how he wound up trying it. There are other, less lethal ways, I assure you...and some which yield much the same result but without the fire tunnel. In any case, you're just in time for the premiere. We think the movie we're unveiling is going to be a smash hit (meaning, it *might* not be on HBO by the time you get home). And before we start, Arnold Schwarzenegger is going to put his footprints in dry cement. Who says movie stars aren't macho anymore? So right this way...yours is the seat with gum under it!

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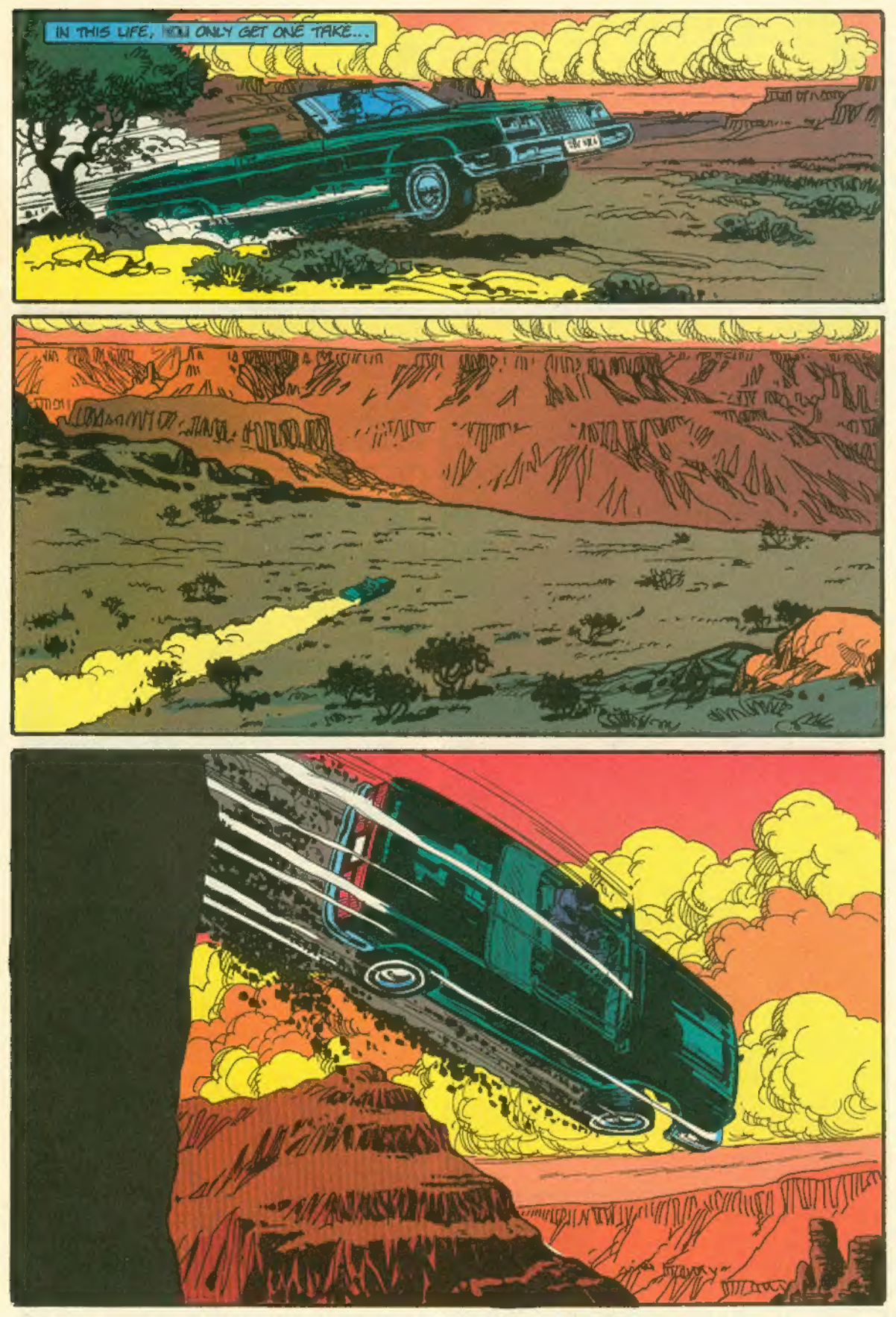
IN THIS LIFE, YOU ONLY GET ONE TAKE...

BUT IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING, ONE TAKE IS ALL YOU NEED...

CHAZ REINHART KNEW WHAT HE WAS DOING: THAT'S WHY THE STUDIOS HIRED HIM. "KING OF THE STUNTMEN," IT SAID ON HIS BUSINESS CARD...

HE DIDN'T DO A LOT OF STUNTS HIMSELF ANY-MORE. HE WAS TOO SUCCESSFUL FOR THAT. BUT THOSE HE DID WERE ALL *SPECTACULAR* ONES...

...AND THEY ALL MADE THE PAPERS. CHAZ SAW TO THAT.

TOUCHDOWN. AND HIS CREW WAS THERE TO MAKE SURE HE WASN'T SCRATCHED..

THE CREW, HE CALLED *TEAM KAMIKAZE*, ITS EVERY MEMBER EAGER TO FOLLOW IN CHAZ'S FOOTSTEPS...NO MATTER WHICH CLIFF THEY LED OFF...

AND NOW THE TEAM HAD ITS *NEWEST* MEMBER...

HIS NAME WAS RONALD GAGE AND THIS IS THE STORY OF HIS MOTION PICTURE DEBUT...

...AND DEATH, AT THE SAME MOMENT.

Dear Mom,
Remember how I told you I was having trouble finding roles where I could really show off my acting ability and stretch myself as an actress? Well, I think I've found one. The director had me back for five callbacks (that's what they call an audition when they have you back to read again) and then said I was absolutely perfect for the role. It films tomorrow and I've been working on my lines all evening. This is my chance to really put all my training to the test and to show genuine emotion.
NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!
WHERE IN GOD'S NAME DID YOU LEARN TO ACT?
IN ALL MY YEARS DIRECTING THESE SPOTS, YOU ARE WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE WORST HAMBURGER I HAVE EVER SEEN!
I'M TRYING. HONEST, I AM.
MUSTARD
THE TUNNEL
BY Mark EVANIER AND DAN SPIEGLE

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO PLAY A HAMBURGER! THE TRUE TEST OF AN ACTRESS IS THAT SHE BECOMES THE HAMBURGER!

YOU HAVE TO THINK LIKE A HAMBURGER...WALK LIKE A HAMBURGER...

MAYBE IF I HAD MORE CATSUP ON ME--?

THAT'S IT! I CANNOT WORK LIKE THIS! I'M OUTTA HERE!

I DIDN'T HAVE THIS TROUBLE WITH THE DANCING TOILET PLUNGERS!

MAYBE MUSTARD--?

MELODY BLAKE OFTEN HAD PAUSE TO WONDER: "DID HEPBURN HAVE TO DO THIS STUFF?"

YOU SHOULD HEAR HIM EXPLAIN THE "AUTEUR" THEORY OF LAXATIVE COMMERCIALS...

HE ASKED FOR "FELLINI LIGHTING" ON A SHOT OF THE LOWER TRACT.

I STILL FEEL BAD. I SCREWED UP.

WHO SAYS YOU DID?

YOU'RE MAKING A COMMON HOLLYWOOD MISTAKE, HON. YOU'RE ASSUMING THAT JUST 'CAUSE SOMEONE'S GOT A JOB, THEY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING.

THEY DON'T?

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IT WAS SOMETHING TO PONDER, ALL THE WAY TO THE OFFICE...
SORRY I'M LATE. I GOT GLAZED AND BUTTERMILK.
MELODY, WHO'S RON GAGE?
RON WAS MY BOYFRIEND BACK HOME. HE WAS ALWAYS TRYING TO TALK ME OUT OF COMING OUT HERE TO HOLLYWOOD...
I KNOW ALL THAT, RON, BUT IT CAN'T BE AS BAD AS YOU SAY.
IT'S WORSE. THERE'S NO SINCERITY OUT THERE ...AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT A GIRL HAS TO DO TO BECOME A STAR?
YOU TWO STILL A "NEW TWO TO YOU?"
NO, THAT WAS OVER BEFORE I LEFT. RON'S A NICE GUY BUT WHEN HE GETS AN IDEA INTO HIS HEAD...
I'M NOT GOING TO HAVE ANY GIRL OF MINE HANGING OUT WITH THOSE...THOSE WEIRDOS!
"GIRL OF YOURS?" I DON'T RECALL YOU BUYING ME! DO YOU HAVE A BILL OF SALE FOR ME?

I DO. THIS IS THE PHONIEST, MOST INSINCERE PLACE I EVER SAW... FULL OF FREAKS AND WEIRDOS...
I CAN'T STAND THIS CITY. I JUST--
THEN WHY DON'T YA GO BACK WHERE YA CAME FROM?
SO DAMN SICK OF YOU PUNKS PUTTIN' DOWN L.A. WHO THE HELL WANTS YOU HERE?
COME ON! I'LL DRIVE YOU TO THE AIRPORT! PUT YOU ON A PLANE!
DON'T TRY IT!
RON, LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!
I'VE GOT TO TEACH THIS GUY A LESSON--!
OH, YOU'RE ASKIN' FOR IT, PAL. REALLY ASKIN' FOR IT!

SO IT'S OVER BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU? KAPUT? FINITO? HISTORY? PAST-TENSE?
IT'S AS OVER AS A RELATIONSHIP CAN BE. WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME ABOUT RON?
OH, RON, I'M SO SORRY. I DIDN'T MEAN IT. YOU MEAN A LOT TO ME, YOU KNOW THAT.
LET'S GO OUT FOR A BITE. TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE DOING HERE.
I CAME OUT HERE, SAME REASON YOU DID. TO GET IN THE MOVIES. AND IT LOOKS LIKE I MADE IT, ALREADY.
WELL, THAT WAS AMONG THE DUMBER THINGS I'VE DONE.
MELODY COULDN'T BELIEVE IT: RON GAGE WAS THE LAST PERSON SHE EXPECTED TO SEE OUT HERE...
THIS MAN-- CHAZ REINHART-- HE'S GOING TO PUT ME IN A MOVIE. MAYBE WITH BURT REYNOLDS...
RON, I THOUGHT YOU HATED LOS ANGELES.

I DO. THIS IS THE PHONIEST, MOST INSINCERE PLACE I EVER SAW... FULL OF FREAKS AND WEIRDOS...
I CAN'T STAND THIS CITY. I JUST-
THEN WHY DON'T YA GO BACK WHERE YA CAME FROM?
SO DAMN SICK OF YOU PUNKS PUTTIN' DOWN L.A.. WHO THE HELL WANTS YOU HERE?
COME ON! I'LL DRIVE YOU TO THE AIRPORT! PUT YOU ON A PLANE!
DON'T TRY IT!
RON, LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!
I'VE GOT TO TEACH THIS GUY A LESSON-!
OH, YOU'RE ASKIN' FOR IT, PAL. REALLY ASKIN' FOR IT!

RON! ARE YOU OKAY?
HE STARTED IT! IT WAS HIS FAULT!
PLEASE! LET'S GO!
ANYONE ELSE WHO MESSES WITH ME IN THIS TOWN IS GONNA WIND UP THE SAME WAY! I HATE THIS CITY!

ALL THE WAY TO WHERE MELODY WAS STAYING, IT WAS SECOND VERSE, SAME AS THE FIRST...
--AND ANOTHER THING! THERE'S NO SEASONS OUT HERE! HOW CAN YOU LIVE IN THIS WEATHER--?
TELL ME ABOUT THIS GUY WHO'S STARRING YOU WITH BURT REYNOLDS.
CHAZ REINHART, "KING OF THE STUNTMEN" HE'S WORLD-FAMOUS. EVERYONE'S HEARD OF HIM.
I HAVEN'T
WELL, HE LIKES TO STAY BEHIND THE SCENES
SHORTLY AFTER YOU LEFT MUNCIE, THE PLANT CLOSED DOWN... THEY MOVED PRODUCTION TO JAPAN. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? I COULDN'T FIND WORK...
I HAD TO COME OUT HERE ANYWAY AND WHEN I ARRIVED, I MET CHAZ AND JOINED HIS TEAM...
...FIGURED I'D MAKE SOME BUCKS YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE HOW MUCH I'M GOING TO MAKE.
WHY DID YOU HAVE TO COME OUT HERE?
TO TAKE YOU HOME TO MARRY ME.
WHEN MELODY RETURNED TO WORK
DO I KNOW CHAZ REINHART? DO I EVER! GUY'S GOT ENOUGH MONEY TO BURN A WET MULE--
--AND MOST OF IT CAME FROM EXPLOITING POOR, STUPID KIDS WHO WANT TO BE STUNTMEN...

HE'S BUDDY-BUDDY WITH A LOT OF BIG STARS...DOUBLES FOR THEM. THAT IMPRESSES THE KIDS A LOT...

AND THAT, PLUS HIS REP, DOES IT. HIS STAR BUDDIES INSIST HE BE HIRED AS *STUNT COORDINATOR* ON THEIR FILMS AND WELL-PAID. WHICH HE IS...

...ONLY THE KIDS-- MOSTLY *UNTRAINED* KIDS-- DO THE DANGEROUS STUFF. CHAZ DOES JUST ENOUGH OF THE FLASHY STUFF TO KEEP HIS REP CURRENT...

GUESS WHO TAKES NONE OF THE RISKS AND KEEPS MOST OF THE MONEY?

HAS.. HAS ANYONE BEEN HURT--?

MORE THAN SHOULD HAVE BEEN.

YOU'D BE AMAZED HOW MANY KIDS RAISED ON MOVIES THINK THAT IF YOU DO SOMETHING STUPID AND IT'S ON A *MOVIE SET*, YOU CAN'T GET HURT.

OR MAYBE THEY WANT TO BE IN THE MOVIES SO BAD, THEY THINK IT'S WORTH IT.

RON'S DOING A STUNT TOMORROW. I HAVE TO TALK HIM OUT OF IT.

HEY, MELODY! HOW'S IT GOING?

"OH, JUST FINE, LEO! AND HOW ARE YOU?"

I'M OKAY. HOW ABOUT DINNER TONIGHT, MEL?

"OH, THAT WOULD BE WONDERFUL, LEO! HOW SWEET OF YOU!"

THAT NIGHT, MELODY AGREED TO GO OUT WITH HIM. FOR OLD TIMES SAKE...

LOOK AT THESE PEOPLE! PROBABLY ALL SIT IN THEIR HOT TUBS DRINKING THAT TERRIER WATER.

THAT'S PERRIER. AND RON, WE HAVE TO TALK— ABOUT YOUR CAREER AND ABOUT US...

STRUCK OUT AGAIN?

TWO MORE AND I'M AN HONORARY CLEVELAND INDIAN.

WHAT'S TO TALK ABOUT? I'LL SALT SOME MONEY AWAY FROM THE MOVIES AND YOU'LL COME HOME AND MARRY ME.

I HEARD SOME THINGS ABOUT THIS CHAZ REINHART..THAT HIS STUNTS AREN'T SAFE...

WHAT, YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING? I KNOW. BELIEVE ME, I KNOW!

DOING THE FIRE TUNNEL TOMORROW IS MY CHANCE TO ESTABLISH MYSELF...GET SOME ATTENTION, SOME GOOD OFFERS...

THIS IS MY CHANCE AT A PIECE OF THE PIE. IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE A PART OF MY LIFE, LEAVE NOW.
ARE YOU COMING WITH ME MELODY?
YOU COMING? THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE. DON'T EXPECT ME TO TAKE YOU BACK IF YOU LEAVE ME NOW.
YOU COMING OR NOT?
OKAY, YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE, DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME. I HAVE EVERYTHING FIGURED OUT...
NOT "EVERYTHING." I DROVE.
THAT WAS, SHE FEARED THE LAST SHE'D SEE OF RON GAGE.
WHY DO THEY HAVE TO TREAT US LIKE WE'RE PETS?
I HAD A BOYFRIEND ONCE WHO DID TALK TO ME LIKE A DOG. YOU KNOW "ROLL OVER!" "SIT UP!"
I SWEAR- I WAS AFRAID HE WAS GOING TO PUT A FLEA COLLAR ON ME.
THE THING IS, I ALMOST WENT AFTER HIM.
I HAVE NO FEELING FOR HIM ANYMORE AND YET I ALMOST WENT AFTER HIM. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

I KNOW. HE REPRESENTS YOUR PAST. IT'S SOMETIMES REAL HARD TO THROW YOUR PAST AWAY..
IT'S LIKE AN OLD COAT. YOU'RE ALWAYS AFRAID YOU'RE GOING TO NEED IT SOMEDAY.
HE THINKS HE'S GOING TO BE A MOVIE STAR. .
WHO DOESN'T?
HE'S DOING A STUNT TOMORROW FOR CHAZ REINHART... RIDING A MOTORCYCLE THROUGH A FIRE TUNNEL.
WHAT'S WRONG?
DID YOU TELL JERRY ABOUT THIS? DOES HE KNOW?
NOT ABOUT THE FIRE TUNNEL, NO. WHAT IS IT?
IT'S A GREAT WAY TO GET YOUR FRIEND BARBECUED I'M CALLING JERRY.
IT WAS THREE A.M BUT NAYLOR CAME WIDE AWAKE AT THE SOUND OF TWO WORDS
"FIRE TUNNEL?"
GOOD GOD, EVEN CHAZ AIN'T BEEN KICKED IN THE HEAD SO MANY TIMES HE'D SEND A KID INTO ONE OF THOSE ...I HOPE.
IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN DO?
YEAH. I CAN GO THERE TOMORROW MORNING AND STOP IT
MOST FOLKS THINK STUNTMEN ARE SUICIDAL MANIACS, BUT CHAZ IS GIVIN' US A BAD NAME THANKS, TRILB.

YOU'RE WELCOME, JERRY. SORRY TO WAKE YOU UP. BY THE WAY... ARE YOU ALONE?

YEAH, IT'S BEEN THAT WAY A LOT LATELY. YOU WANNA DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT?

CLICK.

DIDN'T THINK SO, BUT IT WAS WORTH ASKING.

THE FILM WAS CALLED "SKULLMEN." IT WAS ABOUT MEN WHO DO FOOLISH, DANGEROUS STUNTS...

RONALD GAGE OF MUNCIE, INDIANA WAS ABOUT TO LIVE THE PART...

GOD ALMIGHTY! THAT THING'S BUILT ALL WRONG. THEY SHOULD HAVE IT ELEVATED, OPEN ON THE BOTTOM, SO'S THEY CAN HAUL HIM OUT IF HE GETS STUCK...

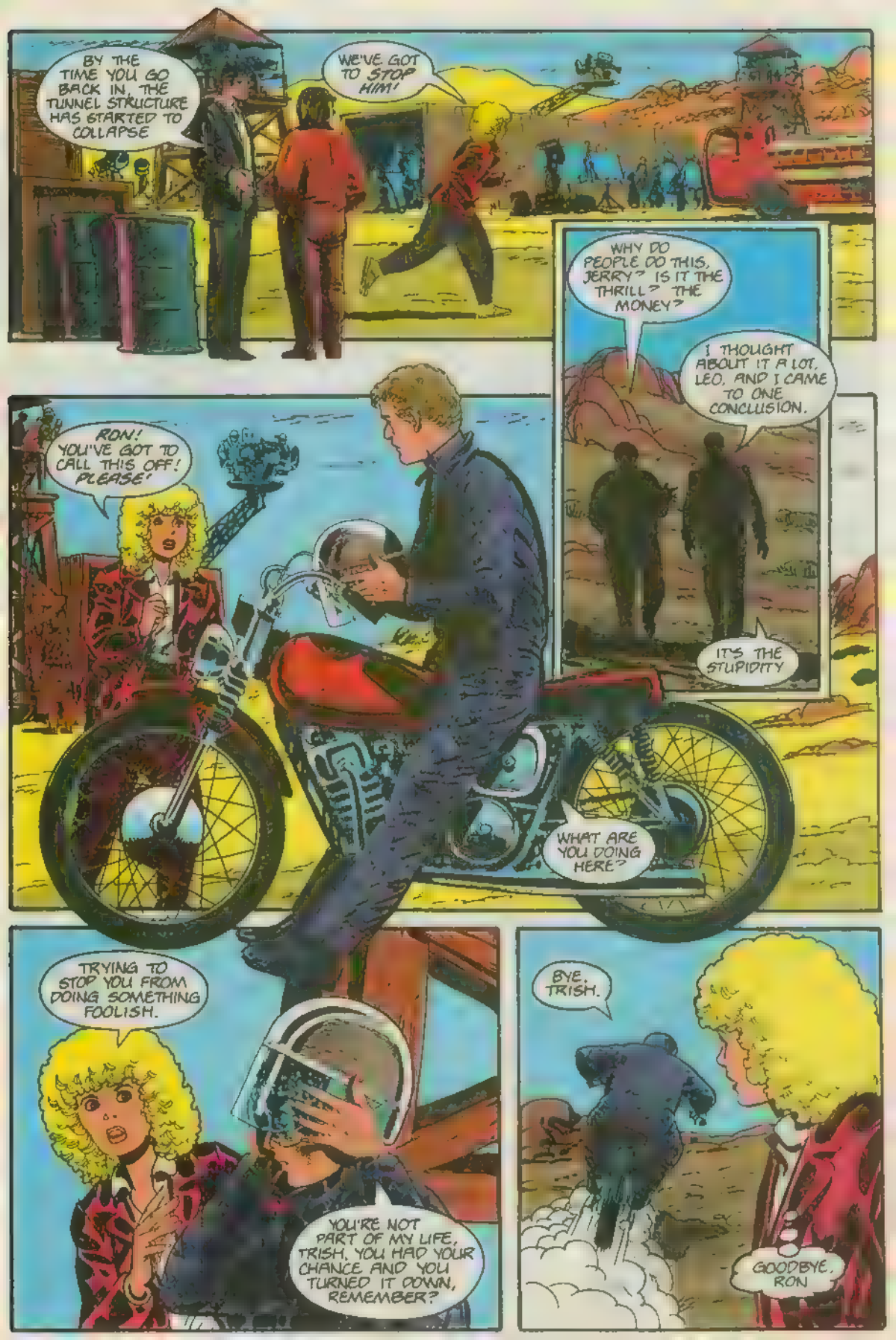
BETTER STILL, THEY SHOULDN'T DO IT AT ALL.

ANOTHER KID OFF THE TURNIP TRUCK, IMPRESSED BY CHAZ'S REP AND ALL HIS STAR BUDDIES...

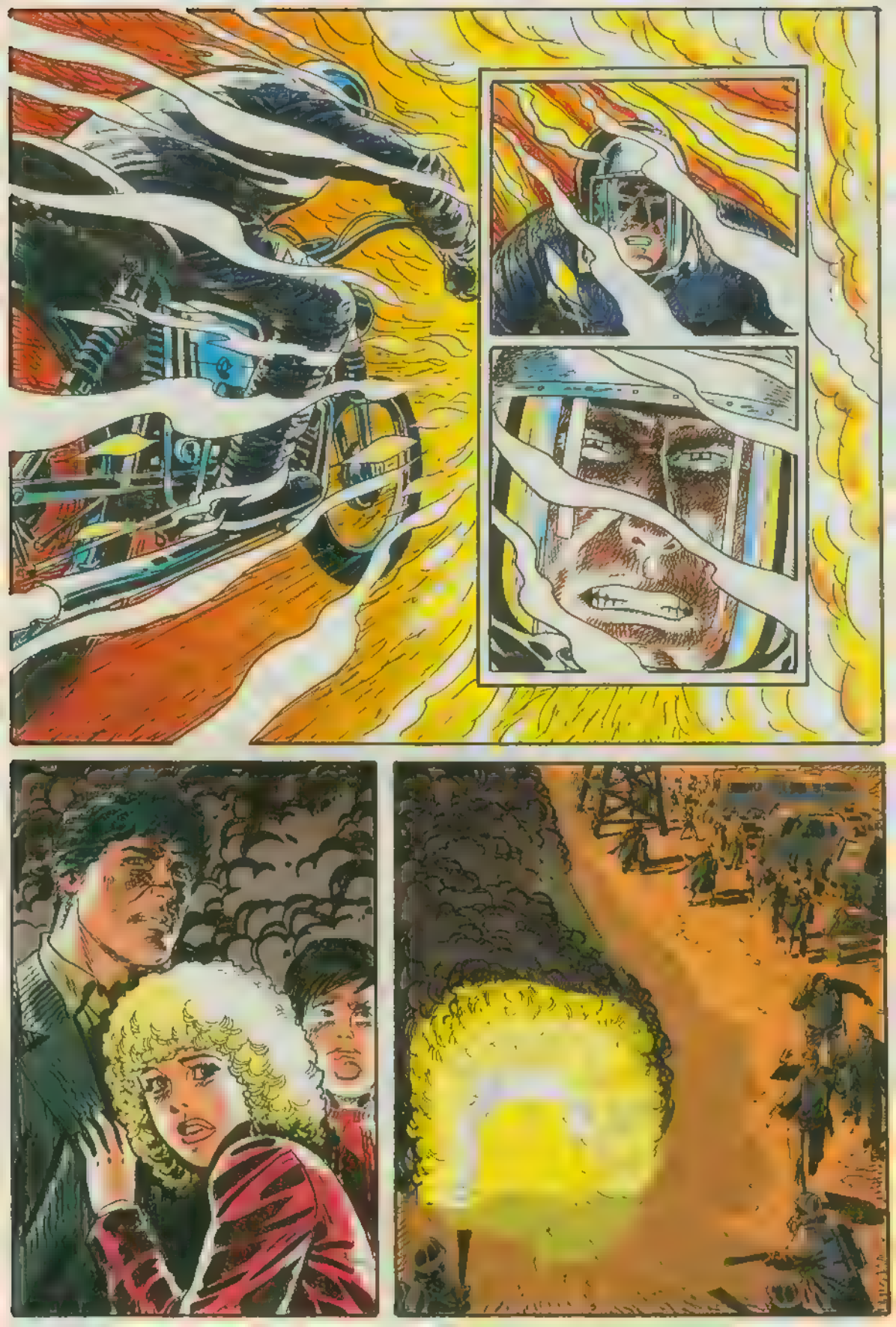
CHAZ IS PROBABLY GETTING FIFTY GRAND FOR THIS AND GIVING THE KID FIVE HUNDRED..

HEY, NAYLOR! I DON'T RECALL SEEING YOUR NAME ON THE CALL SHEET. THIS IS A CLOSED SET.
WHAT'SAMATTER, CHAZ? YOU AFRAID SOMEONE MIGHT TALK SOME SENSE INTO YOUR KIDDY CORPS?
YOU MUST BE RON. I'M JERRY NAYLOR, A FRIEND OF MELODY'S.
SHE SENT ME TO TALK SOME SENSE INTO YOU WHILE YOU STILL HAVE SKIN ON YOUR BODY.
YEAH, RIGHT, YOU GIVING SAFETY LECTURES. HEY, NO ONE'S DROPPIN' A HELICOPTER ON THIS KID--!
TAKE YOUR HAND OFF ME, REINHART. RIGHT NOW.
UNDER-STAND?
I SAID, TAKE YOUR HAND OFF ME!
GET OFF MY SET, NAYLOR. THIS IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS.

HE'S A WASHED-UP STUNT COORDINATOR. THE BEST IN HIS DAY BUT NOW...
ANYWAY, WE'VE GOTTA GET YOU READY, RONNY BOY.
YOU ARE SURE THIS THING IS SAFE, CHAZ?
STILL, I'M DUMB ENOUGH TO TRY...
REINHART! MAKE SURE YOU WARN HIM ABOUT NOT GOING BACK IN!
SOME FOLKS YOU JUST CAN'T HELP...
NAYLOR COULD ONLY WATCH IN FRUSTRATION AS THE STUNT WAS READIED...
"GOING BACK IN?" WHAT DOES HE MEAN?
DID YOU TELL HIM HE SHOULDN'T DO THE STUNT?
IT'S AN OLD SUPERSTITION. DON'T LISTEN TO HIM. NOW, I WANT TO CHECK OUT YOUR EQUIPMENT...
SEE THAT CRATE? TELL IT TO DANCE. SEE IF IT LISTENS.
WOW..HOW DANGEROUS IS A FIRE TUNNEL?
THE FIRST TIME THROUGH, VERY DANGEROUS. THE SECOND TIME IS ALMOST ALWAYS FATAL
"SECOND TIME?"
AFTER A MAN RIDES THROUGH A FIRE TUNNEL, THERE'S A POWERFUL URGE TO GO BACK IN.
NO ONE CAN EXPLAIN IT. IT'S LIKE THE FIRE CALLS YOU BACK IN. MANY RIDERS HAVE GONE BACK IN AND REGRETTED IT.


BY THE TIME YOU GO BACK IN, THE TUNNEL STRUCTURE HAS STARTED TO COLLAPSE
WE'VE GOT TO STOP HIM!
WHY DO PEOPLE DO THIS, JERRY? IS IT THE THRILL? THE MONEY?
I THOUGHT ABOUT IT A LOT, LEO, AND I CAME TO ONE CONCLUSION.
IT'S THE STUPIDITY
RON! YOU'VE GOT TO CALL THIS OFF! PLEASE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
TRYING TO STOP YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING FOOLISH.
YOU'RE NOT PART OF MY LIFE, TRISH. YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE AND YOU TURNED IT DOWN, REMEMBER?
BYE, TRISH.
GOODBYE, RON

ALL TOO SOON, ALL WAS IN READINESS..
ALL RIGHT! LET'S HAVE IT QUIET!
THIS IS A STUNT! CAMERAS PRE-ROLL!
WE HAVE SPEED!
ACTION!



REINHART! STOP HIM!

PUT IT OUT! NOW!
UH, YEAH! PUT IT OUT!

STUPID KID. GOING BACK IN LIKE THAT. I DIDN'T TELL HIM TO DO THAT. IT'S HIS RESPONSIBILITY.
RON! RON!
HI, TRISH. GUESS...GUESS I SHOULDN'T HAVE GONE BACK IN, HUH?
I DON'T THINK HE'LL MAKE IT, MEL.
BUT, I SWEAR TO YOU, I'M GONNA MAKE CHAZ REINHART PAY FOR THIS.

CONTINUED...

SHOW BUSINESS

by Mark Evanier

Cartoons by Aragonés

He wasn't supposed to let me or anyone see it. No bigger secret existed anywhere in Show Biz. But no one was around and we'd been discussing the topic so he — the Vice-President of Comedy Development at NBC — hauled out a thin blue folder and gave me a glance at the list of folks who were being considered to replace Johnny Carson as host of the Tonight Show. "It's definite now," the Veep said. "Carson's leaving in September. And this isn't like before when Johnny announced he was leaving and wound up just renegotiating. This i s *it*. I've talked to him about it, myself. Johnny Carson is leaving The Tonight Show."

This was eleven years ago.

And, as of earlier this evening when I tuned it in, Johnny Carson was still hosting The Tonight Show.

(The NBC exec is long gone, however. In fact, his replacement is gone. And his replacement's replacement. And his replacement's replacement's replacement. And his replacement's replacement's replacement's replacement. And a few others, NBC Vice-Presidents having roughly the life span of the Muscoid Fly. Which is amazing when you consider how little they have to do: Being in charge of comedy at NBC is like being a Nestlé's salesman in Hershey, Pennsylvania.)

Johnny Carson took over the host's chair of The Tonight Show on October 1, 1962. As I write this, it is 1990 and, though he is now renewing his pact there year-by year, the end does not appear to be in sight. The ratings are still good and, if Johnny is sick of the thrice-a-week grind, he is doing a good job of concealing it.

Twenty-eight years. There is no way to describe to someone outside the business how incredible that is because there is no "close second" to compare. Steve Allen hosted The Tonight Show for less than four years and Jack Paar for less than five — and neither gent's stint was considered unsuccessful. Both are, in fact, considered classics of the industry. My guess is that when NBC signed Carson on to fill the timeslot, they didn't even allow themselves the optimism of hoping he might last five years in it. If you had offered to wager cash-money that Johnny might be there into his third decade, everyone — Carson, included, most likely — would have covered your action. It would have been like wagering the guy could walk across Lake Michigan: Simply can't be done.

Carson's nearest challenger is Merv Griffin who, in the same period of time, had a daytime talk show on NBC, a nighttime syndicated talk show, a late-night network talk show on CBS and then another syndicated nighttime program. And all those shows added together do not come close to equalling Carson's tenure.

Who's in third place? Probably Dick Cavett. His late night show was opposite Johnny for a shade over five years, most of the time finishing a respectable second in the time slot. Unfortunately, Cavett had the misfortune to be on ABC when they were finishing first in prime-time and were no longer satisfied with a profitable runner-up position in late night. In the kind of "golden goose" beheading seen so often throughout TV history, someone fixated on beating Carson cancelled Cavett and replaced his profitable second-place show with a stream of unprofitable third-place finishers.

And after Cavett, you have Joey Bishop and Les Crane and Mike Douglas and Sammy Davis and Joan Rivers and John Davidson and Pat Boone and David Brenner and Steve Allen a couple times and Paar again and Alan Thicke and Jerry Lewis and Woody Woodbury and Della Reese and probably my mailman and I think it was Andy Warhol who once said that, in the future, everyone would have their own talk show for fifteen minutes. Which is how long some of the above seemingly ran. Measured against any standard, Carson's longevity is staggering.

So staggering, in fact, that almost since Day One, they've been talking about who would replace him, who would get the Tonight Show. It's been a topic of discussion even when there wasn't the slightest inkling of Johnny going anyplace; at times, he must have felt like a rich uncle watching constant discussions as to who's in the will. My own feeling is that no one will replace Johnny Carson. I think NBC ought to just retire the time slot.

That day in the NBC Veep's office, I was shown a list that included the names of Joey Bishop, McLean Stevenson, David Brenner and Joan Rivers, all evaluated for their various strengths and weaknesses as possible Carson successors. That was eleven years ago and I would guess that, if such a list exists today, none of those names are on it.

(There was a time when, had Carson quit when he was threatening, we probably would have gotten The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Dean, featuring the country-western singer now best known for hawking pure pork sausage. Johnny has not only outlived his competitors, he's outlasted his potential replacements.)

It's not all that fashionable to be a fan of Johnny Carson. No one likes him except most people.

I have heard not a few folks brag of not watching him...even a few dismiss what he does as easy (yeah, right, that's why most TV shows last twenty-eight years). Though the man has enough money to buy Nebraska, his ties to his home state are clear enough that it is easy to dismiss him as a panderer to Middle America. "Middle America" is an oft-heard slam levelled at anything in entertainment that commits the backwater sin of not being overtly L.A. or N.Y..

I don't think that begins to explain Carson. He has developed, perhaps not even consciously, an unerring feel for what interests America, what they want to hear. He knows, for instance, that Big Stars whining about how tough it is to be in Make-up at six A.M. or what a pain it is to be pestered for autographs, send viewers fumbling for the remote. Which is why, as on few other chat shows, the host politely terminates such ramblings and segues to the next topic. He knows that America squirms to see folks on TV fawning over non-entities...so Johnny fawns rarely and, then, only over a Bob Hope or Jimmy Stewart. He knows what America knows about and doesn't. Other shows settle arguments about that using Carson as the windsock. I wrote a variety show once for which a sketch was proposed about ratings "Sweeps Week." A debate broke out as to whether that was too inside for the viewers and the discussion went round and round until someone — probably me — pointed up that Carson often does jokes that presume a knowledge of what "Sweeps Week" is. That settled it. Because, on things like that, Johnny is rarely wrong.

The real marvel of The Tonight Show is the monologue, one of the few places on TV one can hear actual Current Events jokes, often scathing ones. When some outrage is detailed on the news, there is a comfort to have Johnny up there, almost always first to weigh in with the appropriate comment. When a Senator or Congressperson gets into a scandal, Johnny is always the first to do jokes about it and, more important, the first to stop. He knows just when folks stop thinking it's funny. The live audiences that line up outside NBC-Burbank to watch Carson tape his show for later airing are perhaps the most statistically-accurate cross-section of America one could hope to assemble in one room.

Jokes occasionally die and one might note that Carson's monologue batting average is not as high as, say, Robert Klein doing a guest spot later in the show. But a Robert Klein is performing a routine that may have taken months to develop and which has been assiduously tested and refined in Comedy Store clones about the country. Johnny's out there with brand-new material every time — material he has probably never before spoken aloud. I have never known a professional comedian to be in anything but awe of the amounts involved, how well most of the jokes are received, and at Carson's skill for recovery when they are not.

Obviously, I am impressed.

Three times in my career, I have been offered employment on the writing staff of The Tonight Show. That I have never accepted has to do with a conversation I had once with someone who did. A friend who'd done six months service in such a job asked me one day, "You a fan of Carson's? I was, too. That's why I'm kinda sorry I went to work there."

"The reason Johnny's been on so long is that he treats every show like everything's riding on it. He figures he has to be at his best every night so everyone who works for him has to, as well.

"Everyone has a job to do. If you do your job, everything's fine. If you don't...well, the only time you'll ever see Johnny get mad is when he feels someone isn't doing their job. Because he figures he's the one on the spot without the proper support."

"When I started there, I did okay. Used to get something strong into the monologue practically every show. That's how you know you're carrying your weight. You hand in your material for the monologue and then Johnny edits it, all by himself. He picks the jokes out, rephrases some, adds a line or two of his own...and then it all goes down to the cue card guy. You can usually spot the new guys on the writing staff sneaking down there, trying to get a look at the cards, trying to recognize their jokes. If you go three days without getting on the cards, you might as well go up and clean out your desk.

"One nice thing about Carson...if he picks out your joke to do and it dies, he doesn't hold it against you. Your job is to give him stuff that he thinks will work. If it doesn't, he recognizes that he was just as wrong as you were or maybe he didn't tell it right. But he doesn't rephrase your joke and then blame you if it dies.

"When I started out with Carson, I did pretty good. Got a lot of stuff on the cards and into the desk spots. But it's one thing to write jokes and another thing to do it every day, day in, day out, even when there's nothing in the news. You run out of stuff...I did, anyway. By my twentieth week there, I had used up every old line I'd ever thought of, done a switch on every joke I had in my head...and pretty soon, I was just dry. The stuff I handed in was just awful.

"They let me go. And I didn't blame them for a minute. Johnny has to go out there and do jokes and I wasn't supplying enough of them.

"But it was nastier than it had to be, that was my only beef. Some things were said that I thought were needless...

"I still can't watch the Tonight Show for pure enjoyment. I used to love watching

Johnny and now I just can't. That's why I'm sorry I took the job."

And why I turned down *my* three offers.

But I have still managed to be around The Tonight Show a lot. Johnny tapes in Stage 1 at NBC-Burbank. Stage 1 adjoins Stage 3 and shares a common make-up room and dressing room corridor. I wrote on a number of shows that taped in Stage 3 and so got to observe the mysterious, almost ritualistic process of the taping of The Tonight Show.

One morning, I was doing a show in Stage 3 with my friend, comedian Jeff Altman. Jeff does what is generally hailed as the best Carson impression in the business; he has yet to appear on the Letterman show without Dave urging him to do a little of "Doc's here? Doc's not here? Ed's here?" It is a legend of the Comedy Store (and a true one) that Jeff was once up on-stage doing Carson when, much to his shocked amazement, Johnny strolled up and joined him.

That morn, we had a lull in the taping and so, like little kids slipping in somewhere they shouldn't be, we snuck over to Johnny's set. This was long before anyone had arrived for that day's taping. Jeff stood on Johnny's star and delivered a thoroughly filthy monologue *a la Carson*. Then he sat behind the desk, drummed with Johnny's pencils and interviewed me in the guest chair about my career writing *Mickey Mouse* comics. "Hey, that's wild," he kept saying. (Most impressionists who do Carson today are actually doing Altman doing Carson.)

We were sitting there playing when someone walked in. Turned out to be Barbi Benton — a guest on that night's show — who had arrived an hour early for band call. We went on with our routine, Ms. Benton watching us like there was nothing the least bit odd about what we were doing. Apparently, she decided that this must be something new here — a rehearsal Carson, I guess — and she idled over, sat on the couch like a guest, and joined in our conversation: "Well, y'know, Johnny, I'll be singing at the Palomino in the Valley next Tuesday..."

Jeff was the perfect gentleman. Just like Johnny always is. Still doing Carson, he conducted a straightforward interview about Barbi's singing career. Then he called for a commercial, thanked Barbi, plugged her album and we got the hell outta there.

Later, as the Tonight Show crew began arriving, Jeff and I were wandering the dressing room corridors and he was still doing Carson, this time talking about how Doc was off somewhere doing obscene things with a Clydesdale. We turned the corner and there, obviously having heard it all, was Doc Severinsen. There was an awkward silent moment and then Doc broke up and Jeff, much relieved, decided to stop doing Johnny for the day.

In the make-up department is one private room and if its door is closed in the late afternoon, it probably means Johnny is inside, getting made-up. During the few hours that precede each taping, Carson is All Business and it is understood that no one is to bother him with small talk or social niceties. And even if you didn't understand that, you couldn't; during the time he is on the studio premises, he is usually accompanied by a uniformed Burbank police officer or, if there have been recent threats, two.

When he is made up, Carson single-mindedly hurries back to his office to finish preparation for the impending show. He rarely exchanges words with that night's guests, preferring that whatever happens between them happens before the cameras. It is easy to see why Johnny has gotten the rep as being cold and impersonal.

Until just before 5:30, while the ritual, unneeded audience warm- up is being conducted by Ed and/or Doc, no one sees Johnny. That is when he reappears, accompanied usually by director Bobby Quinn.

His head is full of monologue and his manner is tense: He has never done this before and his whole whole life and career are riding on it.

(I have aided a couple of stand-up comedians prepping for their Tonight Show debuts; sat backstage with them to hold hands and tell them it would all be fine. So important is Tonight Show approval to a comic that his life and career could be said, with but slight exaggeration, to truly be riding on his performance. For real. And while some of my friends were among the tensest folks on this planet, especially then, not a one of them was as taut before his first time as is Carson, heading out there for monologue number umpteen-thousand.)

Just as Ed intones, "And now... herrrrre's Johnny," Johnny moves into position behind the parti-colored curtains and is cued through by his director who then sprints up to the booth to assume command.

Right behind where Executive Producer Fred deCordova sits, there's a little area wherein the staff can gather to watch the proceedings. It used to be that when I was at NBC anywhere near 5:30, I'd slip over to that spot and watch at least the opening. Whereas David Letterman chats with his studio audience before tape rolls, those attending The Tonight Show see not a glimpse of Johnny before he makes his entrance. And what an entrance it is: The audience explodes, fueled by The Tonight Show orchestra which, in person, is incredible. Sadly though, The Tonight Show has lately logged enough death threats that no one is allowed to stand back there where I used to stand. Which is a shame for many reasons. Of all the stages I've stood on and tapings I've watched, the first few minutes of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, when it's actually Starring Johnny Carson, are the only times I think I've ever seen magic happen.

After the monologue is delivered, you can see Carson untense by half. During the first commercial, unless he's backstage slipping into Karnak drag, he jokes with the audience and takes a question or two. The questions and/or answers are almost invariably risque, perhaps a release of the excitement just felt by both host and audience. The show is broadcast live via satellite to New York where is taped for later playback in its proper time slot. Until recently when they started scrambling the signal, anyone with a home satellite dish and the correct coordinates could have tuned in on the NBC feed, watched Carson live and heard the conversations during the commercials, including most private, whispered confabs between Carson and guest or staff.

When The Tonight Show started, it was live and an hour and forty-five minutes and included a news update. By the time Carson took over, the news was long gone and so was the live part. The show started at 11:15 and then, since some stations had a half-hour of news and would join the show at 11:30, the program would start over again with a second opening and billboard of guests. As more and more local stations expanded their 11:00 news to thirty minutes, fewer and fewer viewers got to see the Carson monologue. Considering the work that went into the stand-up spot, it was understandable that Carson would get steamed over this. There was a quarrel with the network — one of many Johnny has had — and, as usual, he won. The Tonight Show went to ninety minutes and simultaneous starts. Some years ago, citing a desire to keep the show from going stale, Carson pruned it further to an hour. The network was furious but, as it turned out, Carson was probably right: The show is tighter, the energy doesn't have a chance to fade and we are spared that last dreary guest spot. Plus Johnny leaves the set, wishing the show had gone on longer, no doubt pleased if the audience feels likewise.

A few years ago, on a show I missed, Johnny inadvertently said some unkind things about one of my closest friends. The details are immaterial except to say that Johnny had his facts mixed-up and didn't know what he was talking about...and my friend was deeply, deeply hurt by the incident.

I phoned up Fred deCordova and explained the situation. He instantly agreed that a large apology was warranted and he told me that if I wrote a letter giving the facts, he would guarantee that Carson would apologize on the air. I did and, as advertised, Johnny did a long and gracious retraction at the earliest opportunity. It was so sincere, in fact, that several former Tonight Show staffers, including the gent I quoted up topside, phoned me to ask how I had arranged it. Did I have photos of Johnny with an underage goat or something?

Three weeks later, I was walking through the NBC complex, passing Carson's parking space that is, sad to say, the high point of the NBC Studio Tour. Suddenly, a two-seater Mercedes pulled into it, one of its seats occupied by J. Carson. Guards were scurrying out to escort him but I was between them and him and, at that moment, it didn't dawn on me that I was commiting any felony by stepping up to Johnny, introducing myself and thanking him for the prompt and civil apology. So I did.

My back was to the guards but I could tell that they were in a high state of alarm. They may even have gone for their guns. Johnny waved them away and stood there with me, his arms full of papers and folders, chatting for maybe five minutes. He seemed genuinely thankful that I had gotten the correction in so promptly and without a lot of litigation threatened. He even laughed when I said, "Well, I thought you could do with a few less lawyers in your life." I recall thinking it was one of those Bizarro World moments: Me making Johnny Carson laugh.

I was delighted he was so polite because, just as I wouldn't have wanted my Tonight Show watching dampened by an unhappy experience on staff, I wouldn't have wanted it despoiled by an ugly encounter with Carson. I'm sure he is capable of incivility; I'm just pleased I didn't see it.

He shook my hand and thanked me again. And then he went in to do his show. And I went home to watch it.

— Mark Evanier

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Being that he's off doing the glad-handing business thing, Epic Comics Exec Editor, Carl Potts, asked me to fill in for him on this month's column. Business, indeed. Personally, I think Carl's still on his quest for the World's Perfect Fishing Hole!

The late September United Kingdom Comic Art Convention in London served not only to be a very congenial atmosphere to rub elbows with some of the writers and artists in the Epic Comics employ but also serves as a fairly effective lead into

TAKING A LOOK BACK. . .

As we had hoped, the long-awaited and critically-acclaimed 4-issue **Last American** series has proved to be a big hit! I had a chance to meet with writer **Alan Grant** and artist **Mike McMahon** who were on hand to spread good cheer. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to hook up with Alan's co-writer on the project, **John Wagner**.

The year 1990 also produced another winner — the adaptation of **Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser**, with the creative team of writer **Howard Chaykin** and artists **Mike Mignola, Al Williamson** and **Sherliyn Van Valkenburgh**, it was nothing less than expected.

NO REST FOR THE WEARY

The office flat files are beginning to bulge with scripts and artwork as we prepare for the Epic Comics **1991 line**. Here's a few of my Hot Picks. . .

If you like satire, samurai warrior action, sword and sorcery adventure or even feline fury, the **Samurai Cat** will be for you. Penciler **Frank Cirocco** and inker **Jim Hummel** handle the art chores. Painted covers for this 3-issue, 32-page offset series are done by **Mark Rogers** himself.

A couple of other goodies brewing in the pot include a 4-issue series of original material featuring **Captain Confederacy** of Steel Dragon Press fame and a sci-fi project written by the aforementioned Mr. Grant with the art being produced in . . . well, you'll just have to tune in to future columns to find out more details on this mysterious piece of business.

Stick around, I think you'll like what you see . . .

—**Nel Yomtov**

epic arms

checklist

JANUARY PREMIERE!

METROPOL #1—Strange things are happening: mysterious deaths, mad dogs running wild, and a mass murderer terrorizing the city. But that's just the beginning. In the middle of it all is Jasper Notochord, one man who is about to begin a journey that will lead the city—and the world—to the edge of Armageddon! Beginning a bizarre new monthly series from Ted McKeever. For mature readers.

LIMITED SERIES

CADILLACS AND DINOSAURS #5 of 6—Two more beautifully illustrated tales of the Xenozoic Age—as Jack searches to discover Hannah's secrets, we trace the trials of a sheepdog protecting his herd from dinosaurs! By Mark Shultz with Steven Stiles.

THE NEW ALIEN LEGION: ON THE EDGE #3 of 3—The conclusion to the bookshelf series finds Nomad Squadron free from the Black Hole, but kicked forward in time 15 years to a harsh future, where Legionnaires wear "obedience collars" and Nomad becomes a strictly suicide squadron! Written by Chuck Dixon, illustrated by Larry Stroman with Mark Farmer.

ATOMIC AGE #3 of 4—The alien Nimbus and his prey are both stalked by an ambitious Army Colonel and a hotdog reporter—each for his own purpose! Written by Frank Lovece, art by Mike Okamoto and Al Williamson.

FAFHRD & THE GRAY MOUSER #4 of 4—Two more of Fritz Leiber's acclaimed sword and sorcery tales: The roguish duo battle mystical creatures, zombies and the charms of an evil sorceress, and are pitted against each other in a tale of manipulation and deceit. Adapted by the all-star team of Howard Chaykin, Mike Mignola, and Al Williamson.

THE LAST AMERICAN #4 of 4—Ulysses S. Pilgrim finds a journal that holds the answers he seeks—are there any humans left alive on Earth? Written by John Wagner and Alan Grant, art by Mike McMahon.

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF CHOLLY AND FLYTRAP #2 of 3—Cholly continues to search for the kidnapped Flytrap in a post-apocalyptic world of deception and danger! By Arthur Suydam. For mature readers.

GROO THE WANDERER #75—Conclusion to the 3 parter featuring Groo (make that King Groo) with amnesia. His memory returns—at exactly the wrong moment. By Sergio Aragonés with Mark Evanier.

HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTARS #4—Part 2 of a 3 parter exposing the seamy side of the Hollywood stunt-man business. Lots of spectacular and deadly motorcycle, car, and airplane stunt action by Hollywood insider Mark Evanier. Art by Dan Spiegle and Sergio Aragonés.

CLIVE BARKER'S NIGHTBREED #8—The flesh-eating Nightbreed strike a deal with a human arms dealer to wipe out Cabal and his Nightbreed companions, once and for all. Written by D.G. Chichester, art by Mike Manley.

STALKERS #12—Final issue, featuring deadly showdowns and a critical controversy! Written by Jan Strnad and Mark Verheiden. Art by Val Mayerik.

TOMORROW KNIGHTS #6—The dramatic climax as the Knights face Kievyn Karr's mysterious "Project New Rodina"—a plan that spells death for the Soviet Union and the Tomorrow Knights! Written and illustrated by Roy Richardson and Rod Whigham.